THREADS OF FATE.

By MARTHA M'CULLOCH WILLIAMS.

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"It do seem like a pity, but I s'pose it must be did."

Aunt Clarissy Hughes held her stepson's brand new "store breeches" between her and the light and looked critically at their flat, firm seams and their general excellence of finish. Stephen bought them Saturday, wore them to Asbury meeting Sunday, folded them with nicest care and laid them away in his drawer against the bran dance. It was to come off Friday at the Sulphur Spring. This was Monday morning. Since daybreak he had been afield with the negroes. Now it was 10 o'clock. His stepmother felt in each pocket of the garment, scratched her head with a needle from the knitting she had just laid down, pinched the cloth reflectively, sighed and repeated plaintively: "It do seem like a pity, but Melony's his own aunt, and it won't do to make her mad. Lemme see! What does she say?"

With that she unfolded a crumpled strip of paper, evidently torn from an old letter, and read for the fifth time:

DEAR SISTER CLARISSY—Please loand me the patrons of Stephen's new breeches. Them my William McKendree seen on him at Asbury meetin house yesterday. He say he must have a pair like them and his pa have gone to town after the cloth. No more at present. Your affectionate sister, MELONY TAYLOR.

Aunt Clarissy laid it down with another sigh, then stepped to the back door and called shrilly, "Reuben!" A small black boy in white cotton shirt and trousers popped out of the kitchen door and half strangled himself trying to say "Ma'am!" with his mouth full of watermelon. Aunt Clarissy looked at him a half minute, then said apologetically: "You'll have to wait awhile, Reuben. When you git done eating, go round to the horse block, git your mule and put him in the stable. Be sure you give him plenty to eat. Then you play about till I call you, but don't you go near the parster. The bull is loose today, and don't you git hurt anywhere," adding, apparently to the air, "Brother Dan'l thinks as much of his niggers as he does of William McKendree. If anything happened to one of 'em here, I reckon he'd turn Squire Hughes right out of the Asbury church." Then after a little undecided pause she called, "Jane, are you busy?"

"Yes'm; shellin peas," came in a thick, throaty voice from the kitchen's gloomy depths.

"Where's Ann?"

"Here, but she's got er powerful misery in de spine of her back."

"Dear me alive! Tell her to go home and let me send her a mustard plaster to put on it. What is Laura doing?"

"Ain't dis waush day? You oughter know she done gone ter de creek wid Mammy and Lou."

"Well, I declare! She had no business to go. I mean to tell Stephen to put her in the field for it. Where are Rachel and Silvy?"

An inarticulate smother of contemptuous laughter preceded the reply.

"Rache is er projickin somewhars—arter blackberries, I spect. I done sent Silvy down ter de big bottom arter roas'in ears. De gyarden corn is all gone, and de boys tells me de's er God's plenty on 'em down in dat forrard fiel."

"Yes, and Stephen said that wasn't to be touched, he sent way off for the seed—you know he did. I'll tell him just as soon as he comes to dinner."

A mountain of dark flesh covered with white Osnabur rolled into the doorway and said with a broad, judicial gravity: "Miss Clarissy, you'se er church member. Ef I was you, I wouldn't say things what I knowed I wasn't gwine do. Whut's de matter? How come you wantin ever'body all ter once?"

Aunt Clarissy got pink to the tips of her ears. She was a small, apologetic looking woman, with mild black eyes set deep in a white, wrinkled face, altogether a striking contrast to the sturdy figure that fronted her across 20 yards of sunlit space. Steadying herself on the doorpost and half turning about, she said peevishly: "No, I won't tell him. I hate a fuss, and you all know it and impose on me. I just wanted somebody to help me, but I reckon I can do the work myself."

"Dat'll be de shorest way," Jane said, nodding her blue turban. Then relenting, she added as she disappeared within, "I'll send Silvy des soon as she fetches de corn and shucks it for de pot."

Aunt Clarissy heard nothing of the postulate. Breeches and scissors in hand, she was making her way to the company bedroom, where Stephen never set foot. Sitting down by the north window, she began carefully to rip apart one leg of the fated garment, murmuring to herself as she did it, "I know 'most Stephen won't like it, but Melony wants the patron, and how else can she get it?"

An hour before sundown Reuben and his mule were trotting home. The rider sat perched on a big bag of watermelons and gripped with his right hand a roll of cut newspaper tied about with a blue yarn string.

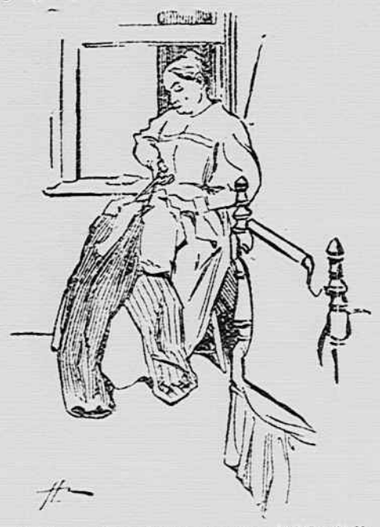
About the same hour next day Aunt Clarissy was saying to Silvy: "There isn't so very much to do, Silvy. I've fixed the pocket and the front piece and sewed on the buttons. The leg is all basted up, and be sure you sew it before Friday."

"Yessum, I will," said Silvy, adding as her mistress walked away, "but I'll take my pledgur time 'bout doin it, sho' es I'm er nigger."

In the vernacular of middle Tennessee, Squire Hughes was very "well off." He had six sons, 50 negroes, a thousand acres of rich land and money at interest in the county town. He had the shell of a house, unplastered within, unpainted without. The only books in it were the big Bible and Wesley's sermons; the only pictures, a profile of the first Mrs. Hughes, cut after her death from the widower's description—hence not startlingly lifelike—and a blue green landscape that had once ornamented the door of a Connecticut clock. There had been a few schoolbooks, too, but as the elder boys married and set up homes of their own the dog eared readers, arithmetics and so on were scrupulously handed over to them, along with the feather bed and furniture, the cow and calf, pair of horses, gun, clothes and a year's supply of meat and corn. That, in Squire Hughes' estimation, furnished "a good start."

Each son was set free at 16 and given a stout young negro, with the use of all the land both could cultivate. With any sort of industry it was easy to lay up $500 a year. If the youngster preferred spending to saving, let him feel the pinch of it when he came to want a wife. So far none of them had felt it. John, Thomas, Joseph and Daniel were men much after their father's pattern, who saved and thrived and kept their families in spare abundance. Whatever the land supplied was used without stint. Luxuries from outside cost money, so were reserved for high days and holidays. Piety, too, ran in the family. The Hughes boys "got religion" and joined the Methodist church as regularly as they married. Indeed, it was a sort of condition precedent to the holy estate. Both happened before the subject of them was one and twenty. Consequently there was a mild surprise through the Asbury neighborhood that Stephen, at 23, was still single and a sinner. A sinner, too, of deepest dye, as the "people called Methodist" reckoned such things. He knew several games at cards, owned the best quarter horse in the county, was suspected of having been to more than one cock fight—above all was a dancer of renown. And dancing was in Squire Hughes' eyes the abomination of desolation. He knew it only by hearsay. It was his proudest boast that he had never been nearer than 100 yards to "such carryins on." Notwithstanding, he said no word to Stephen. His boys once set free were free, he was wont to remark. But on his own plantation he was master. Once, when Stephen went across the yard whistling "Old Dan Tucker," his father called him indoors and asked the circuit rider who happened to be visiting them to "hold prayers" in behalf of this especial sin and sinner. Stephen knelt through it in outward calm, in inward fury. His answer to it was a bran dance in the grove adjoining his father's farthest outlying lands. That was three years back. Every summer since the dance had been repeated, with Stephen's name heading the list of managers. In fact, it came to be a recognized social event and divided honors fairly with the other great occasion—Asbury protracted meeting. The two assemblies indeed fairly marked the line of social cleavage betwixt goats and sheep. The young folk, left to themselves, would have been nobly imparital. Few pious elders, however, had Squire Hughes' habit of letting children go their own gait. There were many freethinking followers of Tom Paine among the settlers, who came thither from Virginia and the Carolinas. Dancing was their chosen pastime, and came to be to their pious neighbors symbolic of unbelief.

That was a busy week for Stephen. Besides his own crop, he had charge of the plantation. Work was pressing on every hand. In addition, the bran dance was nearly all on his shoulders, and that meant at least three days out of the crop. He rose early and lay down late and by dint of doing two men's work himself got affairs in such shape that the most critical could not say he had not time to go a-pleasuring. The strain made him only intensely happy. His heart was in it all, and he had much ado to keep reels and breakdowns from bubbling constantly over his lips. There was very much more in it than a day's merrymaking. Until two months back he had never seen a girl that could make his heart beat faster. One look at Nancy Eton sent him head over ears in love with her. She lived ten miles away, but Stephen managed to cross them at least once a week. In reward, he saw Nancy, sat opposite her at table, maybe exchanged a dozen words with her. The rest of the time Major Eton held the floor. He was Nancy's uncle and guardian and had no other thought than that Stephen came solely for the benefit of his understanding through the major's elegant conversation. If Nancy herself was wiser, she made no sign of it. She was a bit of round, dark, rosy, dimpled prettiness, with a small, sprightly wit and full of gay good humor. It did not need a farm and negroes in her own right to make her a wonderfully taking young person. Stephen would have spoken long before but for lack of opportunity. Go when or how he would, there was always the major. Judge, then, his happiness in the knowledge that he was to have her to himself a whole day, with a ten mile tete-a-tete at either end of it, for she had agreed that he might fetch and carry her upon the fateful Friday. That meant getting up long before day, but in such a cause what was sleep?



"I know 'most Stephen won't like it."

Stephen got barely an hour of it. Of course there was to be a barbecue for dinner. The dancing crowd had given 30 pigs and lambs. These were brought to the ground at sundown the day beforehand, slaughtered, dressed, cut each in half and laid upon clean sticks over an earthen trench 2 feet deep and as many wide, with a bed of hard wood coals glowing dusky red at the bottom. To cook it properly requires about 12 hours, so by 1 o'clock at the latest all must be over the fire. Eternal vigilance is the price of barbecue quite as much as of liberty. As the coals die out fresh ones are added from the log fire blazing at one side. About every ten minutes the meat is basted with salt water. In the last hour's cooking "dipney" takes its place—a wonderful compound of sweet lard, strong vinegar and stronger pepper. That part Stephen knew he could trust to Uncle Si, the head barbecuer. Getting it all under way, though, kept him out of bed until 2 in the morning. To shave and dress for a momentous occasion by light of a candle that just makes darkness visible is no small ordeal. Stephen managed it fairly, though his trousers seemed to him to fit less comfortably than at first. He could not stop to worry over it, though. He was due at Major Eton's breakfast table, and it would never do to have his horses blown before Nancy got sight of them. His passion for her had cost him a new buggy and a set of double harness. This was the first trip in the new rig. If he came back from it engaged, he would count the $500 the luckiest investment of his life.

It was a fair world indeed that Stephen drove over—one in full flush of summer greenery. White mists lay folded athwart the billowy tree tops, dawn winds blew fresh and cool in his face. Birds sang strong and clear from hedgerows dripping dew, cornfields in silk and tassel gave out a fine, faint fragrance. In the bottoms morning glories overran them and hung, bells of white and blue, and pink, and purple, and scarlet, in wreathy vistas or made a carpet over the rich dark mold. Breadths of clover were all a-shimmer with gray dew, the scent of grapes and peaches came keen and sweet to the nostrils, rabbits ran and partridges piped in the yellow wheat stubble, and over all lay the tender, tremulous shining of earliest day.

Bran dances are peculiar there, an outgrowth of pioneer times that lags superfluous to our own. The first settlers had vivid memories of assemblies and county balls in the seaboard states. Lacking ballrooms, they built big bush arbors in some grove beside a spring, beat the earthen floor hard and smooth, covered it an inch deep in bran or sawdust, set the fiddlers and the prompter high at one side, made rough tables for the barbecue dinner and asked all the county to come and be merry. Dancing began as early in the morning as enough dancers could be got together and lasted throughout the day. Waltzes were unknown, the cotillon even looked at askance, but the good company gave its whole heart and mind and feet to the quadrille and the Virginia reel. Stephen's bran dance had a few modern improvements, notably in the music, which was to be made by a full string band of much local renown. There would be broiled chicken, boiled ham, cake, ice cream and fruit of all sorts to supplement the barbecue, not to mention tea and coffee, lemonade and fresh sweet cider. Then, too, the invitations were simply gorgeous—printed in colored ink upon cream laid embossed paper. Only ladies received them. Any man of good soical standing was free to come if he pleased. If an objectionable one appeared, he was promptly warned off the grounds by the floor manager, who upon this occasion was to bedeck himself with a sash and a badge worthy the chief of a militia parade.

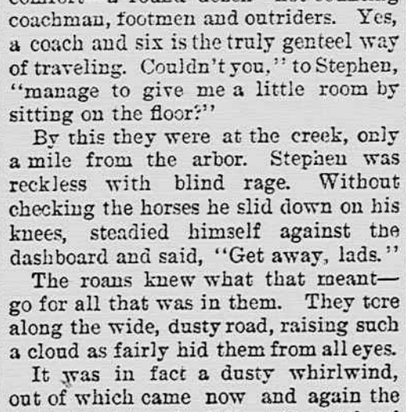
It was agreed upon all sides that Stephen had "laid himself out," over the affair. His heart swelled with pride as he drove slowly past and found everything going exactly as he would have it. It was a good omen, quite good enough, in fact, to banish his superstitious feeling over being forced to tell his love Friday, notoriously the day of bad luck. About three hours later he stood on Major Eton's piazza the happiest young fellow in the county. He had come, seen, conquered—at least he had reason to think so. Nancy had received him with unconcealed empressement, fed him upon smiles, broiled chicken and waffles—all were equally adorable. Now she was beside him all in vapory white, with a red rose at her belt and another in her hat, critically admiring the turnout which stood at the steps ready to receive her. Major Eton walked slowly around eying it at all points. Virginia bred, he rated himself as an expert in matters of equipage. Stephen was all impatience to be off, but it stood him in hand to be in the major's good graces; so he dared not hurry him. After the third round the major pulled off his hat, wiped his forehead reflectively with his red silk handkerchief and said patronizingly, "Pretty fair, Steve, pretty fair; very well indeed for a young fellow's buying. I could have done better, of course, but I'll know more about it after I've tried it. Jump in, you two, and let's be off!"

Stephen stood aghast. Could it be possible that the major meant to trust his 200 pounds to the light, narrow vehicle that he had counted would put him in such delicious proximity to Nancy? Desperately affecting to misunderstand, he said: "It is time to go. Come, Miss Nancy! Good morning to you, major. Tom, let 'em go"—this last to he black boy who stood at the heads of the champing, fiery, silver roans.

Major Eton put on all his Virginia gentleman's dignity to say, "I hope, Mr. Hughes, that I misunderstand you. My niece accepted your invitation for us both. We go or stay togther."

"Certainly, certainly—glad to have you. I didn't hear. Let me help you in," Stephen said breathlessly, but through set teeth and with eyes of smothered fury. It was not so much the spoiling of his ride with Nancy as the ridiculous figure he would cut driving up before the crowd in such a plight that moved him to wrath of the deepest dye. What if Tom Beasley, the rival he most dreaded, should overtake them on the road! That, at least, should not happen. With scant ceremony Stephen bundled the major in, handed Nancy into the narrow space beside him, clambered up, braced himself against the edge of the seat which alone was visible between them, and sent the silver roans away at a slapping pace. The road ran straight over a region of long, undulant swells. His span could take over twice the weight now behind them at top speed. Go they must and should even if they had to breast ruinous steeps.

Go they did. The first mile was covered at such a rate that Major Eton could only sit breathless and silent, while Nancy, pale to the lips, clung openly to Stephen's arm. But neither war, pestilence nor earthquake could long stop the major's tongue. Reaching forward, he laid a hand on the reins and said, with his usual serene patronage: "A very pretty spurt, my boy. Your cattle are speedy, truly, but rein them in a bit. We do not want to be the first arrivals. Let the common herd gather before we come on the festal scene."



He sprang out and rushed away.

"I can't; I'm manager," Stephen said laconically, giving the nigh horse a little flick of the whip. The sound set the mettled creatures off again at a rate that made the buggy groan and sway in most unorthodox fashion. Major Eton began to fret. "Really," he said, twisting his bulk about, "this is a remarkably uncomfortable vehicle. I don't seem to have elbow room."

"It was meant to carry two," Nancy said demurely, while Stephen shut his teeth on an oath. The major went on affably: "Doubtless, doubtless. Buggies are a low bred, democratic sort of conveyance anyway. You should have seen my grandfather's carriage—chariot, I had better say. It held a dozen with comfort—a round dozen—not counting coachman, footmen and outriders. Yes, a coach and six is the truly genteel way of traveling. Couldn't you," to Stephen, "manage to give me a little room by sitting on the floor?"

By this they were at the creek, only a mile from the arbor. Stephen was reckless with blind rage. Without checking the horses he slid down on his knees, steadied himself against the dashboard and said, "Get away, lads."

The roans knew what that meant—go for all that was in them. They tore along the wide, dusty road, raising such a cloud as fairly hid them from all eyes.

It was in fact a dusty whirlwind, out of which came now and again the flash of paint and gilding, the rattle of chains, the quick thud of hoofs. The road was fairly thronged with other comers, but all gave Stephen room and to spare. "Must be going for the doctor or his marriage license," Tom Beaseley said as the swish of a long silver tail let him know who it was that was flashing past. After a minute he added, "Thought I heard old Bee-Martin's pipe in there, but sho'ly Stephen wouldn't put up with him in place o' Nancy, and it's a dead moral certainty that one buggy can't hold 'em all."

At last Stephen had a ray of hope. He had distanced the rest in spite of the major. When they came abreast the barbecue pit, he would excuse himself upon the plea that he must stop there, give the reins to Nancy and by taking a short cut across the creek be at the arbor in time to receive and welcome her. To face her, he sank to a half sitting posture. He had just opened his lips when "Cr-a-s-sh!" came the sound of breaking thread. Aunt Clarissy's basting was most substantial, but could not stand the play of Stephen's vigorous muscles. Evidently Silvy's "pledger time" was later in coming than the bran dance, and Stephen must face his ladylove with a gaping slit from pocket to knee. The horror of it made him dumb. After one downward glance he crowded the reins into the major's hands, sprang out and rushed away with Nancy's soft, cruel laughter ringing in his ears and Major Eton chorusing, "Next time, young man, don't be in such a hurry that your mother won't have time to get your breeches done."

Stephen easily got home and was made whole as to his raiment. The wound to his affections never healed. Nancy tried hard to "lure the tassel gentle back again," but that thoughtless laugh cost her an excellent husband. For Stephen joined the church that fall and at Christmas married the circuit rider's daughter and kept her in cotton wool the rest of her life. It was only two years, but to this good day her husband keeps faith with the memory of the woman who caught his heart "in the rebound."

THE END.

Remarkable Eighteen Letter Names.

Did you ever stop to think that there is anything remarkable in a name of 18 letters where they compose both the given name and the surname? Note the following remarkable list: Lucius Domitius Nero, Nicholas Copernicus, William Shakespeare, Emanuel Swedenborg and Napoleon Bonaparte. By spelling the name of the discoverer of America as the Italians do, Colombo, it, with the Christopher, makes another name of 18 letters. The above six, each with 18 letter names, are among the best known persons of history.—St. Louis Republic.

Easily Fixed.

"Remember, boys," said the teacher, "that in the bright lexicon of youth there's no such word as fail."

After a few moments a boy raised his hand.

"Well, what is it, my lad?" asked the master.

"I was merely going to suggest," replied the youngster, "that if such is the case it would be advisable to write to the publishers of that lexicon and call their attention to the omission."